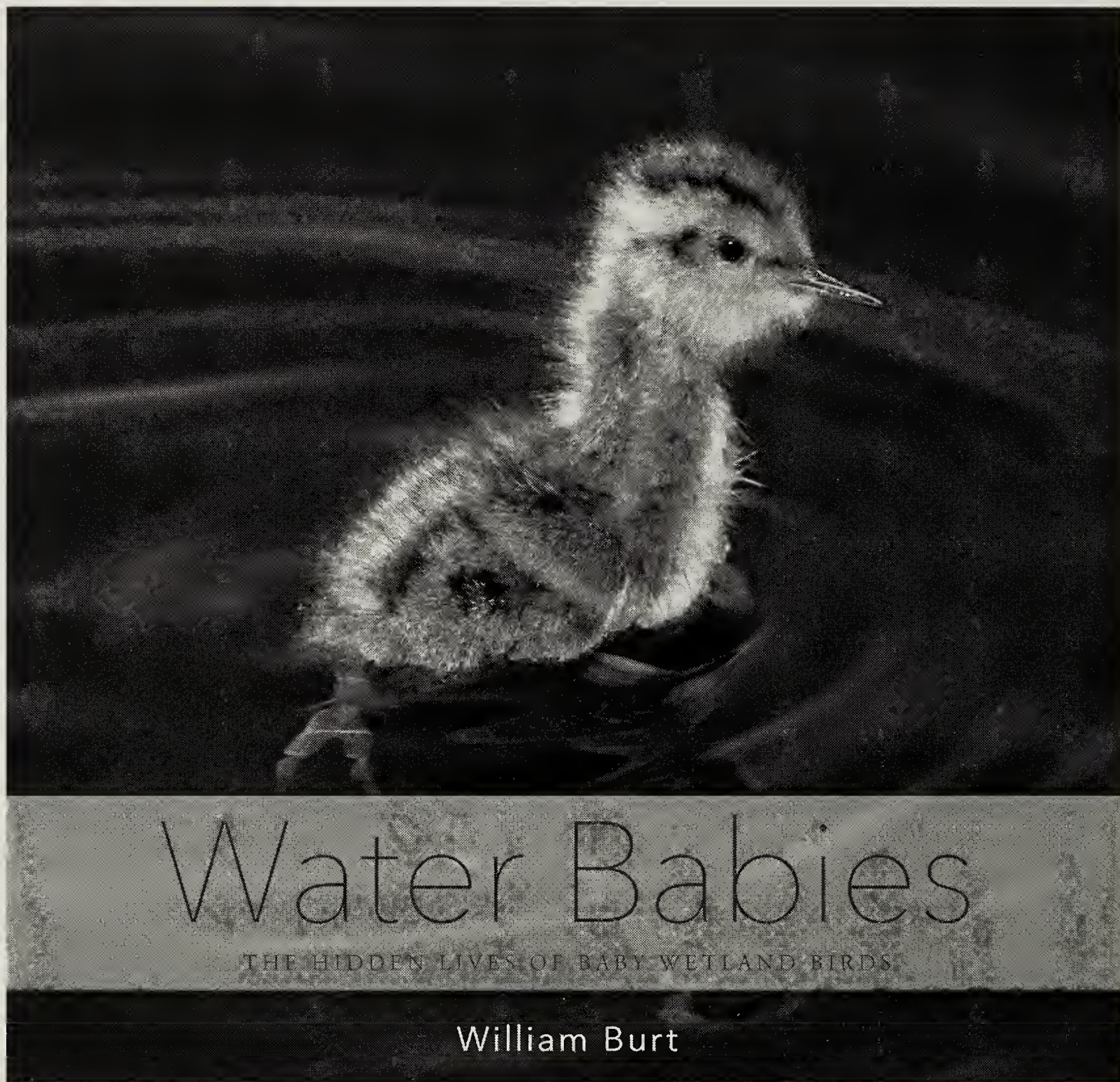

BOOK REVIEWS

Water Babies - Review by Philip S. Taylor

Water Babies – The hidden lives of baby wetland birds. William Burt. The Countryman Press a division of W. W. Norton & Co. New York, N. Y., 2015. 205pp. 23X24cm.



In *Water Babies* William Burt offers us an intimate glimpse into the earliest days in the lives of birds linked to water and wetland habitats; a time that is fleetingly short and of necessity shrouded in secrecy. Through stunning photographs and notes drawn from his personal experiences we learn details about families of birds from the swamps of Florida to the prairie wetlands

of Saskatchewan and north to the Arctic tundra of Churchill, Manitoba and Alaska. Forty-two species of grebes, egrets, herons, geese, ducks, mud hens, gulls, terns, jaegers, shorebirds and bitterns are treated. As a bonus, Burt generously shares his experiences and tips on how to safely photograph birds while placing their well being first.

Books covering this topic are few and even “*A guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds*” by Paul Baicich and Colin Harrison (Second edition 1997) is nearly 20 years old, and does not illustrate all the very young chicks or downies of our bird species. Burt’s book is not a field guide but rather an expedition of discovery into the lives of very young birds which he’d never seen. In seven chapters we are treated to, as he puts it, “a whole new catalogue of creatures and challenges enough to last a lifetime”. Nearly half of the species covered were photographed wholly or partly in Canada. Luckily for us he finds Saskatchewan one of his “favorite of all places on earth”. At Crane and Chaplin lakes he captured images of breeding Eared, Western, Pied-billed and Red-necked grebes, Franklin’s Gulls, American Coot, Ruddy Ducks, American Widgeon, American Avocets and Wilson’s Phalaropes. At Churchill, downy shorebirds were the highlight: American Golden and Semipalmated plovers, Whimbrel, Least Sandpipers, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers, Red-necked Phalaropes plus Canada Geese, and Arctic Terns. In both provinces the author enlisted the help of biologists to find and photograph baby birds safely – a measure of his great concern for the wellbeing of his subjects and a high standard worth emulating by all nature photographers. His third Canadian stop was to photograph Northern Gannets on Bonaventure Island, Quebec.

Accompanying the photographs, many which are best classed as art, is

a text full of anecdotes and important natural history facts which touch on key conservation issues of today. We learn details of the insults water birds have experienced from over exploitation by humans for food and fine feathers. And how, unfortunately, even today’s strong regulations do not protect sensitive colonial nesting water birds from ignorance. Burt relates a story where a Hollywood director ordered a charge of dynamite be detonated in a southern swamp to cause birds to “fly and prettify a sequence for his movie” – the birds rose and kept flying, never to return. We read about bottlebrush down, so effective in creating camouflage for some tundra shorebirds. We visit the “slums of bird-dom” and see downy grebes engaged in eating feathers – a trait of the tribe. Burt was fortunate to have Roger Tory Peterson as an early and direct mentor who shared his curiosity, love and respect for birds with the author.

This book covering such a unique subject succeeds on several levels. The high quality photos are matched with knowledgeable prose – not something easily achieved. The text is clean and error free. I found some inconsistencies in the Index, for example: not all species referred to in the text are listed (seabirds on p121), and one species with a photo lacks its scientific name (long-tailed duck). But these are minor quibbles which do not detract from the book’s high quality. William Burt’s *Water Babies* would make an excellent gift and will find an appreciative audience in homes of birders, naturalists and photographers.

